

Recommendations for Improved Adolescent Sexual & Reproductive Health in DRC

GROWING UP GREAT! POLICY BRIEF

Working together for adolescent health

Growing Up GREAT! is a gender-transformative sexual and reproductive health (SRH) program for in-school and out-of-school very young adolescents (VYAs) ages 10-14 years, and the important adults in their lives. It was developed, piloted and scaled up in Kinshasa, DRC from 2016-2022 in collaboration with the Ministry of Health's National Adolescent Health Program (MSP/PNSA), the Ministry of Education's Department of Family Life Education (EPST/DEVC) and local community-based organizations. In the final year of scale-up, Growing Up GREAT! was also integrated into programming supported by the Ministry of Social Affairs. An external evaluation found that Growing Up GREAT! increased SRH knowledge and communication and improved key gender attitudes among participants, both immediately after the intervention and years later.^{1,2} More information on the intervention design, results and program partnerships are available on the project website.

Over the last six years, Growing Up GREAT!'s collaborative learning efforts drove adaptation to improve effectiveness and sustainability³, with the goal of ensuring activities continue under government leadership following the end of donor funding. During scale up, these efforts included a qualitative study that revealed the program can be effectively delivered by school and community actors through existing systems⁴, and a final learning meeting with key stakeholders that resulted in a set of policy recommendations for sustainability. These recommendations are presented below.

Recommendations for policymakers:

Maintaining and expanding positive outcomes for youth

✓ *Include Growing Up GREAT! activities in annual operational plans and budgets*

Despite being included in the PNSA's 5-year Strategic Plan and integrated into the Family Life Education program, no government funds have yet been made available for Growing Up GREAT! activities. Funding is needed to support training and supervision of teachers, school directors, inspectors, and especially of the RECO/RECOPE, who require more intensive capacity-building. Funding is also needed to support ongoing activities such as VYA clubs and family/community discussions. Government partners must first prioritize such activities for inclusion in provincial and local-level government work plans and budgets and then work with technical and financial partners to identify and allocate resources for them. Costing data are available to support this process.

✓ *Issue a ministerial decree governing establishment of school clubs*

Clear guidance on establishing and running Growing Up GREAT! school clubs is needed to ensure local education authorities are adequately informed and engaged to support program activities. This is especially important to support implementation in private and parochial schools, which in the past have refused to include FLE or Growing Up GREAT! in their programming in the absence of a directive from the Ministry of Education. Such guidance should include clear instructions for storing, accessing, and preserving Growing Up GREAT! materials within schools, and funds of approximately \$5000/year (to cover replacement of 50 toolkits at \$100 each) must be made available by the government for replacing materials as needed.

✓ *Improve collaboration between provincial and local level health and education authorities for improved supervision and support*

Stakeholders at all levels of the health and education systems must improve communication and reporting. Within the health sector, provincial level staff should inform health zone teams in advance of the supervision schedule to ensure they can collaborate and co-supervise. And both health zone teams and provincial level representatives should complete administrative reporting in a more consistent and timely way to ensure MSP/PNSA staff can provide support and recommendations for improved quality. Within the education sector, EPST/DEVC and provincial level staff should establish a regular supervision calendar and implicate *cellules de base* to ensure stronger supervision and accompaniment of trained teachers.

✓ *Integrate Growing Up GREAT! into programming for out-of-school VYAs*

The pilot program integrating Growing Up GREAT! into Centres de rattrapage should be expanded by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Such an expansion is imperative to ensure out-of-school adolescents have access to the benefits of Growing Up GREAT! and give them a chance to “catch up” to their in-school peers, as was seen in the program evaluation.

✓ *Establish a coordinating body to support inter-ministerial collaboration*

Government stakeholders, led by the MSP/PNSA and EPST/DEVC who have overseen Growing Up GREAT! from its start, should establish a coordination body or mechanism to ensure strong communication and collaboration in support of Growing Up GREAT!’s multi-sectoral approach and to track progress and accomplishments over time. In particular, health system activities for VYA clubs will require close collaboration between the health and education sectors. Activities for family and community members, which are implemented by RECO/RECOPE, will also require close oversight. Stakeholders leading this effort should consult the specific list of Ministries and organizations proposed by participants at the final learning meeting to ensure inclusiveness and success of the endeavor.

1 Growing Up GREAT! Shows Promise in Skills Development and Norms Shifting After One Year. January 2021. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

2 Center on Gender Equity and Health. (2022). Impact of Growing Up GREAT! on the Lives of Very Young Adolescents: One and Two Years after Program Implementation. La Jolla, CA: Center on Gender Equity and Health at the University of California San Diego for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

3 Center on Gender Equity and Health. (2022). Learning and Adapting: Using responsive feedback to increase Growing Up GREAT!’s effectiveness and scalability. La Jolla, CA: Center on Gender Equity and Health at the University of California San Diego for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

4 Experts SARL, Save the Children, Center on Gender Equity and Health. 2022. Les résultats de l’étude sur la durabilité de l’institutionnalisation au niveau des Ministères de la Santé et de l’Éducation La Jolla, CA : Université de Californie San Diego pour la Fondation Bill & Melinda Gates.